

# **Domestic Violence in the Hispanic Immigrant Community: Toward an Explanatory Model**

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## **Statement of the Research Problem**

One million U.S. women are annually subjected to domestic violence (Carlson & Choi, 2001). Hispanics are now this country's largest minority (Cohn, 2003), and some researchers believe they may be particularly vulnerable to domestic violence problems (Kantor, Jasinski & Aldonardo, 1994; Perilla, Bakeman & Norris, 1994). Researchers concerned with immigrants believe that vulnerability in those communities is exacerbated because immigrant women often have so few options other than to remain living with the men who abuse them (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002). Some research has suggested that help-seeking Hispanic women domestic violence victims may look first for assistance for their husbands in order to keep the marriage intact (Acevedo, 2000).

## **Research Background and Hypotheses**

The purpose of this mixed method study was to advance development of an explanatory model for domestic violence in the Hispanic immigrant community. Attention to domestic violence in immigrant communities is a relatively new phenomenon in social work research, and the focus of social work domestic violence research generally over the last fifteen years has shifted toward study of female victims and away from theorizing about origins of the problem (Pyles & Postmus, 2004).

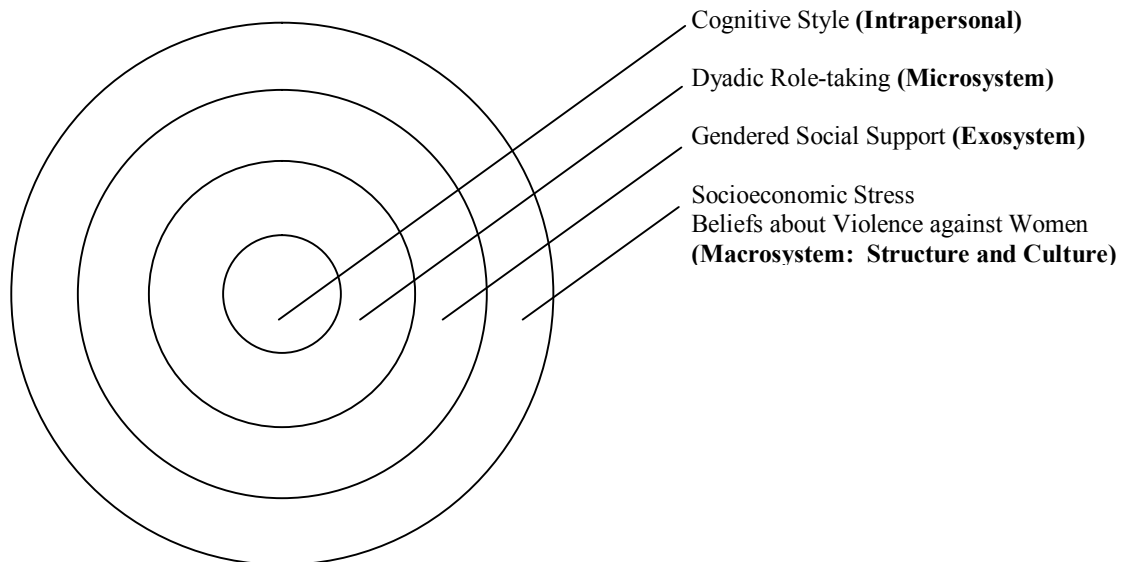
This study sought to generate new knowledge by focusing on 45 Hispanic immigrant men who were known perpetrators of domestic violence and comparing them with 43 demographically similar Hispanic immigrant men who were not domestically violent. The objective was to search for differences between the two groups on selected etiological variables and to look for relationships among the variables as a step toward further development of a population-specific explanatory model.

Two separate streams of literature are important foundations for attempting to understand domestic violence among immigrant populations. This study considered both of them, the domestic violence literature and the immigrant literature, looking for illuminating intersections that could help identify a specifically relevant set of explanatory variables. Included wherever possible was the nascent literature relating specifically to domestic violence in the Hispanic immigrant population.

An expanded ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Belsky, 1980) was used to organize the five etiological (independent) variables selected for the study. The ecological approach gave theoretical support not only to simultaneous analytical consideration of multiple variables along the whole person-in-environment continuum but also to the association of ecological instability (a defining feature of the immigrant experience) and marital violence (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The study's independent (predictor) variables were: 1) psychosocial/socioeconomic stress; 2) beliefs/attitudes

bout violence against women; 3) gendered social support networks; 4) dyadic role-taking; and 5) cognitive style (locus of control and self-management). These variables are arrayed in a nested ecological model below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Independent Variables in Nested Ecological Model



The operations of individual etiological variables of the study were explained in greater depth by supporting theories relevant to each on its own. Each variable is shown paired with the theory used by the study in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical Support for Individual Variables

| <i><b>Independent Variable</b></i>   | <i><b>Theory</b></i>   | <i><b>Theorist</b></i>                        |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Psychosocial/socioeconomic stress    | Stress Theory          | Selye, 1956<br>Lazarus, 1980<br>Pearlin, 1989 |
| Beliefs about violence against women | Social Learning Theory | Bandura, 1977<br>Bandura, 1979                |
| Gendered social support networks     | Social Network Theory  | Dean, 1986<br>Vaux, 1988                      |
| Dyadic role-taking                   | Symbolic Interaction   | Mead, 1934<br>Stryker & Statham, 1985         |
| Cognitive Style                      | Cognitive Theory       | Rotter, 1966                                  |

The study sought support for two quantitative hypotheses.

H 1: Compared to non-domestically violent Hispanic immigrants, Hispanic immigrant domestic violence perpetrators will have higher levels of psychosocial and socioeconomic stress, be more likely to believe that violence against women is justified, have more externally oriented cognitive style, and exhibit greater deficiencies in role-taking within their marital dyad.

H 2: The impact of stress on perpetrator status will be mediated by beliefs about violence against women, cognitive style, and dyadic role-taking, with beliefs about violence against women being moderated by gendered social support.

In addition, the study asked a series of qualitative questions: among domestically violent Hispanic immigrant men, how may migration stresses, gender role norms, and social support networks influence beliefs about violence against women?

## Methodology

The population was male Hispanic immigrants living in the Washington, DC metropolitan area in suburban northern Virginia, from which a purposive sample was drawn. The sample was comprised of two groups, based on domestic violence perpetrator status. The perpetrator group consisted of participants at the start of court-mandated domestic violence group treatment programs over the course of a year at a social services agency in Falls Church, Virginia. The non-perpetrator group was drawn from a variety of sites in roughly the same suburban area.

The quantitative study utilized a 136-item questionnaire in Spanish. It included a number of demographic questions and incorporated six existing scales (some consisting of several subscales), some of which the researcher adapted for this study. The scales (or subscales) used for the study are displayed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Scales and Subscales Used for Independent Variables

| <i><b>Independent Variables</b></i>    | <i><b>Scales and Subscales</b></i>   |
|--|--|
| Stress                                 | Chronic Stress Scale (Noble & Ahearn, 2001)  |
| Attitudes about Violence against Women | Inventory of Beliefs About Wife Beating (Wife Beating is Justified and Wives Gain from Beating subscales) (Saunders, Lynch, Grayson & Linz, 1987)                |
| Gendered Social Support                | Interview Schedule for Social Interaction (Availability of Social Integration and Availability of Attachment subscales) (Henderson, Byrnes & Duncan-Jones, 1981) |
| Dyadic Role-taking                     | Dyadic Perspective-taking Scales (Self scale and Other scale) (Long, 1990)   |
| Cognitive Style                        | Internality, Powerful Other & Chance Scales (Levenson, 1981)<br>Self Control Schedule (Rosenbaum, 1980)  |

Exploration for correlations among the study's variables was done using Pearson's  $r$  in bivariate analyses. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the study's multivariate  $H_1$ , seeking direct relationships between the study's etiological (independent) variables and its dependent variable, perpetrator status. Path analysis was used to test the study's multivariate  $H_2$ , seeking both direct and indirect contributions to perpetrator status.

For the qualitative portion of the study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of 1-2 hours each with eight of the Hispanic immigrant men in the perpetrator group. These variable-focused interviews dealt with the interviewees' migration experiences (both transit and resettlement), their perspectives on gender roles in their home countries and in the U.S., and their social networks (as potential sources of influence on attitudes about domestic violence). The interview transcripts were analyzed for narrative theme content and for function of narratives.

## Results

### *Demographics*

Although there was no attempt to actually match the two groups in the sampling process, there were no statistically significant differences between them on the vast majority of demographic characteristics. An abbreviated demographic profile of the entire sample is encapsulated in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Demographic Profile of the Study Sample

- 60% from Central American countries
- Mean length of time living in the U.S. = 9 years
- 80% read Spanish well
- 59% have limited or no English language speaking skills
- 66% have limited or no ability to read English
- 80% immigrated voluntarily
- 70% are working fulltime (some seasonally); 20% unemployed
- Mean annual income \$23,900 (likely overstated)
- Mean years of school attendance = 9.7 (range 0-18)

*(No statistically significant differences between groups on these characteristics)*

There were, however, two areas of statistically significant difference, as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Demographic Differences Between Groups

- Mean Current Age
    - Perpetrators 32.1 years
    - Non-perpetrators 36.7 years
  - Mean Age at Time of Arrival in the U.S.
    - Perpetrators 22.1 years
    - Non-perpetrators 28.7 years
- (These differences are statistically significant,  $p < .01$ )

### Quantitative Findings

In partial support of H1, stepwise multiple regression analysis showed that beliefs that wife beating is justified; one element of external cognitive style; and the participant's perception of deficiencies in his wife's dyadic role-taking skills (her capacity to understand him) had statistically significant direct effects on the likelihood that a participant in the study was in the perpetrator group.

The element of cognitive style that appeared in multiple regression analysis was Powerful Others. The perpetrators showed a slight but statistically significant tendency to accord less importance to Powerful Others in their lives than did the non-perpetrators. (This is a correction of the description regarding the Powerful Others subvariable that appeared in the original dissertation. The results stated in quantitative form are unchanged.) However, in terms of general cognitive style, in comparing results across the three scales – Internality, Powerful Others, and Chance – it is more significant clinically that perpetrators and non-perpetrators alike rated the *internal* locus of control as their predominant style. (The lower the score on each scale, the more determinative that locus of control is in an individual's life. Mean scores for the study participants were 10.7 on the Internality scale, 22.1 on the Powerful Others scale, and 20.0 on the Chance scale.)

Neither stress nor gendered social support was found to have a direct explanatory effect on perpetrator status. Finally, the control variable "age at arrival in the U.S." had a direct effect as a predictor variable of perpetrator status; perpetrators tended to have immigrated to the U.S. at a younger age than non-perpetrators. Altogether, the four variables found to have direct effects on the likelihood a participant would be in the perpetrator group accounted for 25% of the variation in perpetrator status. Results of the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Multiple Regression with Perpetrator Status as Dependent Variable

|                           | <i>Unstandardized Coefficients</i> |            | <i>Standardized Coefficients</i> |        |      |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------|--------|------|
|                           | B                                  | Std. Error | Beta                             | t      | Sig. |
| (Constant)                | .656                               | .376       |                                  | 1.747  | .085 |
| Wife Beating is Justified | .014                               | .006       | .280                             | 2.470  | .016 |
| Powerful Others           | .021                               | .008       | .268                             | 2.511  | .014 |
| Other Role-taking         | -.010                              | .003       | -.293                            | -2.968 | .004 |
| Age at arrival in U.S.    | -.012                              | .006       | -.221                            | -2.108 | .038 |

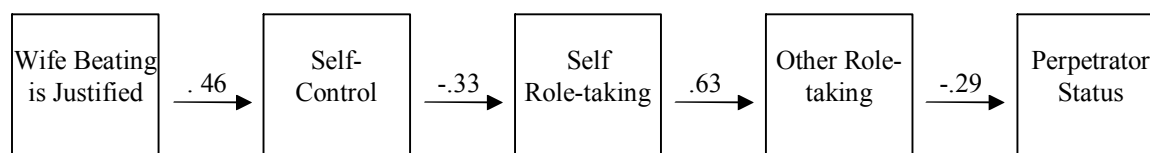
R<sup>2</sup> .247

Using path analysis, the study also provided partial support for H<sub>2</sub>, which explored for relationships between explanatory variables, seeking those that had intervening (or indirect) effects on perpetrator status. Analysis showed the path that included study variables was:

- The greater belief that wife beating is justified, then
- The less the tendency to use self-management techniques to solve behavioral problems (this scale is negatively scored), then
- The lower the individual's self-assessment of his own role-taking capabilities *vis á vis* his wife, then
- The lower the individual's assessment of his wife's capabilities for role-taking *vis á vis* himself, then
- The greater the likelihood that the participant was in the study's domestic violence perpetrator group.

The belief that wife beating is justified, the tendency not to use self-management techniques, and the low assessment of his own role-taking skills *vis á vis* his wife had indirect effects on a participant's status as a perpetrator. (From the multiple regression analysis, it was shown that the tendency to believe that wife beating might under some circumstances be justified also had a direct impact on perpetrator status.) The low assessment that an individual made of his wife's role-taking capabilities *vis á vis* himself, the final independent variable on the path, had only a direct effect on the likelihood that a participant would be in the perpetrator group. Neither stress nor social support networks appeared on the statistically significant path explaining perpetrator status. The path appears in Figure 2 below, with a correction made from the original dissertation by the removal of the subvariable Powerful Others from the path.

Figure 2. Path Analysis



### Qualitative Findings

The qualitative portion of the study sought to enrich understanding of several of the study's independent variables by introducing the perspectives and voices of a small number of perpetrator participants. One of the more important findings of this portion of the study was the light it shed on the surprising absence of stress as a predictor variable.

The entire sample reported surprisingly low levels of stress, despite a host of demographic characteristics usually associated with stress. The content of the individual interviews suggested that current low stress levels might be related in part to their having surmounted perils and difficulties in their migration experiences. Interviewees' migration narratives were invariably "success stories" of harrowing challenges overcome by a combination of ingenuity, fortuity, and personal fortitude. These successes seemed to have provided a base of confidence for the interviewees, strengthening their ability to cope with later challenges. The other factor supporting their seeming sense of current wellbeing was the consistently held view that as difficult as life might at times be for them in the U.S., it was vastly better than if they had remained in their home countries.

The interviews also surfaced useful insights into the potential influence of transitions in gender role norms. Interviewees spontaneously offered the word "*machismo*" in describing role norms in their countries of origin and enumerated the contrasts they had encountered in gender role expectations in the U.S., where the woman is an economic partner and may make important domestic decisions ("*la mujer manda*").

Glimpses of how social support networks may influence attitudes about violence against women also appeared in the interviews. And the central importance of family in the interviewees' lives emerged quite strongly. Finally, there were some interestingly positive reactions to the U.S. as a country of laws, including those against domestic violence.

### **Utility for Social Work Practice**

This study considers the causes and origins of domestic violence in an important social work subpopulation that is minority twice over – both Hispanic and first generation immigrant. In the face of some evidence that immigrant women in general and Hispanic immigrant women in particular may not be able or willing to leave their abusive partners, explanatory models that can provide underpinning for perpetrator treatment models have special salience.

The findings of this study offer useful ideas about the importance of interventions among Hispanic immigrants at the community level to help prevent domestic violence since social networks can exert such a powerful influence on individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Findings also point to factors that could be useful in motivating and treating perpetrators. The study suggests that the importance of family to these men could be a motivator for treatment. Their predominant cognitive style, with its internal locus of control, suggests they are capable of developing greater reliance on self control in a potentially violent situation. The study also suggests that perpetrators maintain beliefs about the justification of wife beating that must be confronted and that teaching empathy to perpetrators could be useful.

The study recognizes that while social work in the last fifteen years or so has done an exceptional job of emphasizing and understanding the needs of domestic violence victims, there has emerged a need to rebalance the research agenda by studying perpetrators in order to give renewed attention to explanations for domestic violence. In addition, the study's background research demonstrates the richness of anthropological literature as an adjunct to psychological literature as a resource for social work research. Finally, the study design specifically acknowledges the multiple realities of domestic violence by using mixed research methods. Though domestic violence research that

combines qualitative and qualitative approaches is rare, this study demonstrates the utility of mixed methodology for examining a problem that is extremely complex and includes components that span the full person-in-environment continuum.



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